

HUFFPOST

School Lunches: Yet Another Diet Mishap?

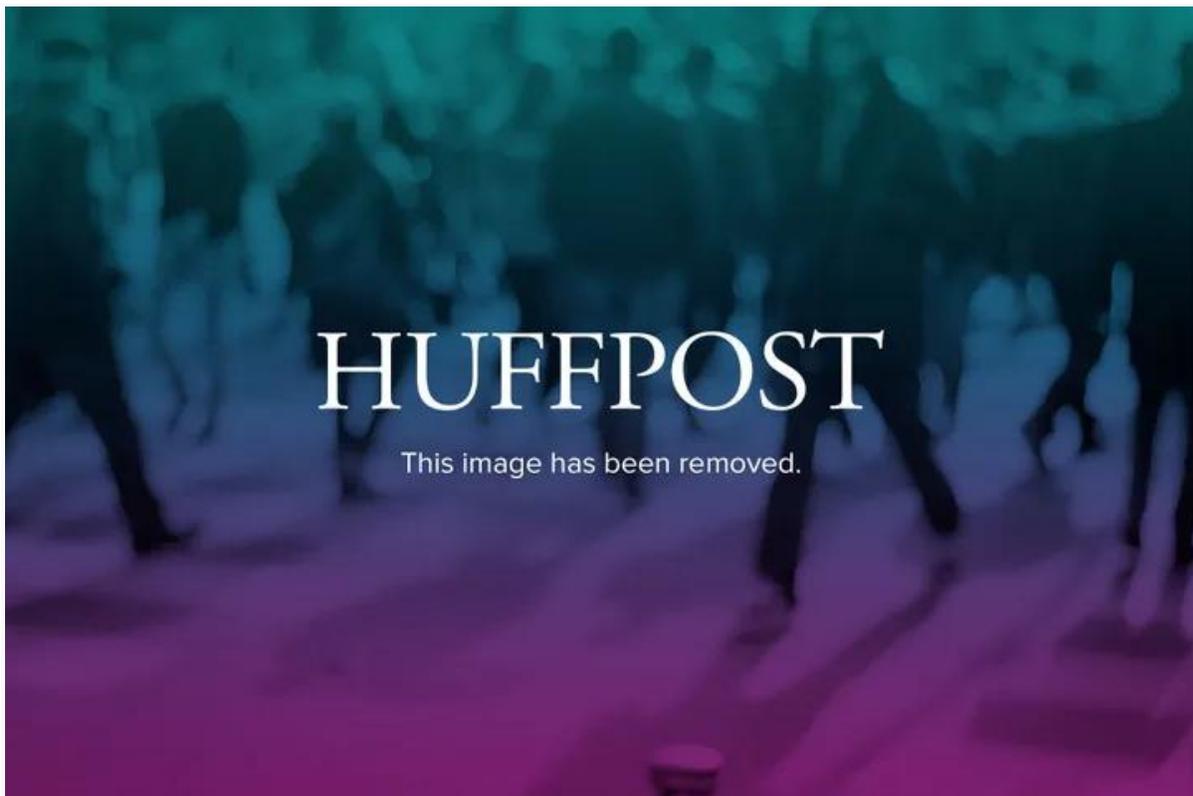
Please, America: Throw away the scales and stop focusing only on calories. Yes, calories are of extreme importance for weight management. But they are only of equal, or perhaps even lesser, significance than food quality.

By

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COMMERCIAL IMAGE - In this photograph released by HBO on Wednesday May 2, 2012, Students of Lasley Elementary School in Lakewood, Colo., Isabel Martinez, Dillon Bushlack, and Kaela Salas, enjoy a healthy lunch from their new

salad bar, courtesy of HBO's The Weight of the Nation campaign in Lakewood, Colo. (Jack Dempsey/AP Images for HBO)

What does America want? Do we want skinny people? Perhaps ultimately costing them their health? Is the school lunch debacle about our children's health -- specifically, the prevention of chronic diseases and the promotion of healthy lifestyles -- or only about losing weight? As of this school year, The National School Lunch Program has cut calories at each meal and has finally included more fruits and vegetables in the lunch line. [According to the USDA:](#)

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 directed USDA to update the NSLP's meal pattern and nutrition standards based on the latest Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The new meal pattern goes into effect at the beginning of SY 2012-13, and increases the availability of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains in the school menu. New dietary specifications set specific calorie limits to ensure age-appropriate meals for grades K-5, 6-8, and 9-12. Other meal enhancements include gradual reductions in the sodium content of the meals (sodium targets must be reached by SY 2014-15, SY 2017-18 and SY 2022-23). While school lunches must meet Federal meal requirements, decisions about what specific foods to serve and how they are prepared are made by local school food authorities.

However, the message we hear through the media -- and yes, from the students too -- is all about too few calories and being hungry for more. This calorie frenzy reinforces America's unhealthy obsession with numbers -- whether they be on a scale or a nutrition label. Are calorie maximums really essential when serving high-quality, healthy foods? Perhaps just getting Americans, specifically our children, to eat fruits and vegetables should be our major concern rather than calorie-counting!

So please, America: Throw away the scales and stop focusing only on calories. Yes, calories are of extreme importance for weight management. But they are only of equal, or perhaps even lesser, significance than food quality. Raising happy and healthy eaters -- our students -- should (really must!) begin with high-quality, nutrient-dense foods rather than lower-calorie processed foods. Fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins and healthy fats are nutrient-dense foods. Foods such as avocados and nuts

are nutrient-dense as well as caloric, but also are vital components of healthy eating programs. Proteins are also critical... Yet the new school lunch program limits students in grades 9 to 12 to just two ounces of protein at lunch (14 grams/protein/day). The question is: Should schools put a maximum calorie level on these foods? If so, should they raise the new maximum 550 kcals to 650 kcals for grades K-5, 600 to 700 for grades 6-8 and 750 to 850 for grades 9-12? Be proactive! See what the new school lunch guidelines are [here](#). Let your voices be heard.

Unfortunately, when children (adults, too!) feel they are being restricted -- and they actually are -- psychological rebellion ensues. Research has [shown results signifying](#) that daughters of mothers who restrict their intakes and/or put them on diets eventually fall prey to binge eating and weight gain. However, The National School Lunch Program has decreased calories on average by only about 100 calories at the lunch meal.[1] So are kids crying hunger because there are fewer calories, or because they just don't like the food being offered... and, consequently, are taking in even fewer calories?

When trying to look at this new lunch scenario from an objective point of view, it seems the government and the public must make some critical decisions. Either allow individuals to be responsible for providing their own lunches, or focus on giving children quality food that not only meets the Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010 but also looks and tastes great! Can we parents expect a lunch aide to get our children to eat veggies if we can't get them to eat veggies at home?

If there is simply a 100-calorie difference in students' meal choices, it seems barely significant enough to cause a raucous. Obviously, if students are not eating the fruits, veggies and grains that make up these calories, they will be hungry and wanting more food. So, if we can shift the focus on calorie-counting to increasing the palatability of the new, healthier foods being offered, we can stimulate a positive impact on school lunch programs. Perhaps even nationwide! Let's Move encourages the Chefs Move to School program. However, getting Jaime Oliver -- or even any chef -- to come to a school once is just not enough. Parents... Can you volunteer your time or

recipes? Instead of salad bars, let's offer vegetables on a hummus platter, or even with ranch dressing. Research reported in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association concluded that vegetable consumption increased by 80 percent when served with ranch dressing. In other words, get creative! Pair these new foods with some older, more familiar foods or just fun foods like dips.[2]

Suggestions to help you make good of the new No Hungry Kid Act:

- Invite chefs to your school once a week, bi-monthly or once a month to teach lunch workers new and healthy recipes.
- Have students rotate through the school kitchen to help prepare meals and offer new ideas.
- Have children plant gardens and eat the food they grow.
- Include cooking class in your curriculum and teach kids how to make healthy, tasty food.
- Create yearly school cookbooks featuring the students' favorite new healthy recipes.
- Teach students how to modify their favorite recipes to develop more wholesome, healthy recipes.

When all is said and done, parents need to be the gatekeepers of their children's intakes. If you can financially afford to, send a balanced lunch from home half of the week or all of the week. Take the time to make your children's lunches. Help organize a committee to create change in your local school. Concentrate on what you can do with this new program rather than bemoaning its limitations. Americans need to change the ways they think about -- and eat -- food. Encourage the consumption of wholesome, less

processed foods, and of course, don't forget to get moving physically to stay healthy and prevent disease.

References:

1. United States Department of Agriculture. Food and Nutrition Service. Comparison of Current and New Regulatory Requirements. N.p., 26 Jan. 2012. Web. 12 Oct. 2012. [Link](#).

2. Fisher, J., J. Mennella, S. Hughes, et al. "Offering 'Dip' Promotes Intake of a Moderately-Liked Raw Vegetables among Preschoolers with Genetic Sensitivity to Bitterness." *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* (2011), doi: 10.1016/j.jada.2011.08.032

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